

**THESIS**

**liris Castrén 2011**

**COLLECTION AND USE OF  
CUSTOMER INFORMATION IN  
TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT:  
CASE VILLI POHJOLA – ERÄSETTI  
WILD NORTH**



**Rovaniemen  
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Thesis

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2011

Commissioned by: Villi Pohjola Domestic Business Customer Team

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The thesis cannot be borrowed.

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The purpose of my thesis was to find out how customer information is collected and used in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. I also viewed the company's meeting customers' characteristics and employees' perceptions on what makes a good meeting.

I conducted a case study since the purpose was to focus on the previously described subjects regarding one particular company, Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, and provide them a tool to help them place even more emphasis on these operations and perhaps develop the products targeted to meeting customers. The qualitative research method implemented was thematic interviews with four employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North.

The analyses proved that a lot of emphasis is put on the collection of customer information at the company. Several channels are utilized to gather this information and using the information in product development is considered important especially in the development of the existing products and services. I also learned about some challenges regarding the areas of study. Some differences in the perceptions for instance of to what extent customer information is used in product development surfaced among the interviewees.

By conducting interviews I was able to view four different perceptions of the meeting customer segment and find out what makes a good meeting in particular for the customers of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North.

**Key words:** customer information, tourism product development,  
meeting customer segment, case study

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Opinnäytetyöni tarkoituksena oli selvittää, miten asiakastietoa kerätään ja käytetään tuotekehityksessä Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North:lla. Selvitin myös yrityksen kokousasiakkaiden piirteitä ja työntekijöiden näkemyksiä siitä, mitkä seikat tekevät hyvän kokouksen.

Tutkimusotteeni oli laadullinen tapaustutkimus, sillä tarkoituksena oli selvittää yllä mainittuja asioita nimenomaan Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North:iin liittyen. Lisäksi halusin tarjota yritykselle käytettäväksi työkalun, jonka avulla he voivat kiinnittää entistä enemmän huomiota mainittuihin toimintoihin sekä mahdollisesti kehittää kokousasiakkaille suunnattuja tuotteita. Kvalitatiivisena tiedonkeruumenetelmänä käytin teemahaastatteluja. Haastateltavina oli neljä Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild Northin työntekijää.

Analyysit osoittivat, että asiakastiedon keräämiseen panostetaan yrityksessä huomattavasti ja sitä saadaan sekä hankitaan useiden eri kanavien kautta. Asiakastiedon käyttämistä tuotekehityksessä pidettiin myös hyvin tärkeänä ja tietoa hyödynnetään erityisesti olemassa olevien tuotteiden kehityksessä. Haastatteluissa tuli esille myös joitakin haasteita toimintoihin liittyen sekä joitakin eroja haastateltavien näkemyksissä esimerkiksi siitä, kuinka paljon asiakastietoa käytetään tuotekehityksessä.

Haastattelemalla keräsin työntekijöillä jo olemassa olevaa tietoa kokousasiakkaista sekä kartoitin neljä eri näkemystä siitä, mitkä seikat tekevät hyvän kokouksen erityisesti heidän asiakkailleen.

Avainsanat: asiakastieto, matkailun tuotekehitys, kokousasiakas, tapaustutkimus

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that the use of customer information when developing new products and services is almost crucial if a company aims to success in the market. Despite this consensus that customer information should be emphasized to a great extent in development projects, only a limited amount of research has been conducted to find out what is done to the acquired information in these projects. (von Koskull 2009, 1.) By conducting research about the matter I hope to learn how customer information is gathered and how it is used in product development projects at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North.

One focus of this study is the meeting customer segment of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. Meetings industry that includes both meeting and congress travel is a part of business tourism that is rapidly growing (Verhelä 2000, 18). A research shows that meetings had face to face in fact do have more positive effects than meetings held in different virtual environments (e-tid.com 2009). I hope to find out what are the priorities and characteristics of the meeting customers of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, and which are the most important responsibilities of the company as the provider of meeting products and services.

The commission for my thesis came from Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. I completed the advanced practical training related to my tourism studies at the company and thus got to know the company and some of its operations. In the beginning of the training in the spring of 2010, together with my company supervisor, we agreed that I would write my thesis as a commission for the company. Even though my topic was somewhat altered in the early phases of my thesis process, I was pleased that the commissioner and I were able to agree on a new topic. The goal of my thesis is to find out how customer information is gathered and used in product development at the company. I will also try to capture information already existing within the company about meeting customers. It seems to be common that companies easily look outside the company when gathering customer information, and

marketing research has for decades encouraged businesses to “ask directly from the customer” (see also García-Rosell et al. 2007). However, often the personnel may know a lot about the customers already. By documenting this information, I hope to provide the company with tools to enhance their process for developing their products and services targeted to business and in particular meeting customers.

A qualitative research was conducted to gain necessary information needed to answer the research questions which are presented later on. My research was conducted as a case study and the qualitative method that was implemented was thematic interviews with four employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. I hope that my thesis helps Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North to develop their product development processes, encourages them to emphasize the use of customer information in product development and provides them with customer information that is beneficial when developing products and services targeted to meeting customers.

## **2 THE COMMISSIONER**

### **2.1 Company Introduction: Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North**

The commission for my thesis came from Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and more specifically from the Domestic Business Customer Team of the company more of which in chapter 3. Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North is the nature tourism service provider of Finnish Metsähallitus (Villi Pohjola 2010a). Metsähallitus is a state-owned enterprise that both runs business activities and takes care of several public administration responsibilities. The enterprise has a challenging task to administrate more than 12 million hectares of land and water areas in a way that serves the Finnish society in the best possible way. (Metsähallitus 2010.) Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North is a destination management company that operates all around Finland and organizes trips also to Norway and Russia. This brings many kinds of customers to the company, and also creates diverse possibilities to customer experiences. In the very heart of the company lies respect for nature and wilderness. The product and service range of the company covers everything from accommodation to different outdoor activity programs and for instance cabin and lodge accommodation is available around Finland. (Villi Pohjola 2010b.)

Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North has own safari-production in Rovaniemi and Saariselkä, and good quality of services in other locations around the country is ensured by choosing partners and suppliers very carefully. In addition to for instance snowmobile, husky, reindeer and quad bike safari programs, the company offers some other outdoor activity services as well, such as white river rafting, hiking, hunting and fishing. (Villi Pohjola 2010b.)

As a destination management company, Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North takes care of its customers from arrival to departure without them having to worry about different practical arrangements (Villi Pohjola 2010b). It has not been too long since Villi Pohjola and Eräsetti merged. The fusion resulted in challenges and opportunities regarding product development. Since the merger, Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North has been working on combining



the products of the two companies in a way that would be most beneficial. (Tourism Product Developer's Handbook 2010.) The company is focused on both international and domestic customers, and they offer something for all different types of travelers, like individual travelers, groups, charters, VIPs and study tour travelers (Villi Pohjola 2010b). Business customers as well as tour operators are also of great importance to Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The wishes of these customer groups are fulfilled by giving them versatile experiences in Finnish nature and by providing all necessary services to make their trip a well-functioning entirety. (Villi Pohjola 2010a.)

Green values seem to be appreciated at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. Ecological, cultural, social and financial factors are taken into consideration in all operations and the ISO 14001 certificate, which the company has possessed for more than ten years, is a good evidence of that. Sustainability is emphasized by for instance using the maintenance services of local entrepreneurs, supporting local textile producers when it comes to decor of the cabins and by also guiding customers to sort waste. (Metsähallitus/Villi Pohjola, 2010, 6.)

## **2.2 Villi Pohjola Domestic Business Customer Team**

The specific commissioner of this thesis project is the Domestic Business Customer Team of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The team is specialized in providing business customers with valuable service ensembles that are actualized close to Finnish nature. Destinations and products targeted to business customers aim at fulfilling the customers' goals in an inspiring environment. The products are made easy and convenient for the customers by enabling them to purchase diverse services from one company. (Villi Pohjola 2011a.)

According to the company website, the product families targeted to domestic business customers are Villi Kokous (Wild Meeting), Villi Hyvinvointi (Wild Wellbeing), Villi VIP (Wild VIP) and Villi Erä (Wild Catch and Game) (Villi Pohjola 2011a). The Wild Catch and Game product family includes all

services related to fishing and hunting trips both in Finland and in Northern Sweden and Northern Norway (Villi Pohjola 2011b). The Wild Wellbeing product family, on the other hand, is concentrated on delivering relaxing experiences for business customers. The product range covers everything from different activities to different treatments and pampering. (Villi Pohjola 2011c.) Wild Meetings offers diverse meeting services and destinations for business customers. The destinations targeted to this customer group are located close to peaceful nature but are still easy to access. (Villi Pohjola 2011d.) Wild VIP is designed for business customers who wish to thank their customers for good and effective collaboration. Wild VIP offers all the necessary services and even more to make the trip memorable and successful. (Villi Pohjola 2011e.)

Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North has destinations targeted to business customers all around Finland. There is a diverse set of destinations of different levels and with different capacities. (Metsähallitus/Villi Pohjola 2007, 10-11.)

### **3 CUSTOMER INFORMATION IN TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT**

#### **3.1 The Importance of Product Development**

For any tourism company it is essential to stay up to date regarding both changing times and trends and the company's own operations. Product development is advised to be continuous; new products ought to be developed and the quality of the already existing products should be enhanced continuously. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 94.) Product development enables companies not only to deliver the basic product to the customers but also produce an entirety that provides the customers with additional value (Kylänen 2005, 51). A key success factor in tourism business is the ability to adapt the company's own production to what the consumers want. The emphasis in today's tourism business is increasingly shifting from focusing on using and gaining capital to utilizing knowledge and knowhow. (Borg et al. 2002, 121.) Using a company's own expertise and knowhow and utilizing the expertise of the partners, versatile products and services can be developed. When the products are carefully designed and answer a certain demand, profits may increase as well.

The producer of a tourism product cannot directly deliver a meaningful experience to the customer; the producer only provides settings for it. A tourism product is compiled from pieces and the final perception of the product is the emotional experience of the customer. The challenge of producing a good product lies here; whether or not the customer is satisfied with a product depends on how well the perceived experience meets the customer's expectations. (Verhelä–Lackman 2003, 74.) However, a change may be seen in the customer's role. Customers are not necessarily just the consumers, the ones who receive the product, anymore. Customers may have a role in producing or making the product and thus the concept of a satisfied customer may be changing.

There are numerous methods to come up with new product or service development ideas. Nevertheless, there are two issues that tourism companies should bear in mind in service production processes; new

products and services should always be designed based on customer needs *and* new ideas have to be based on the company's business idea or complement it in a positive manner. According to Verhelä and Lackman (2003) comparing one's own company to another successful company on the same field of business is a good way to create new ideas for one's business operations. (Verhelä–Lackman 2003, 76-77.)

However, this is a little bit in a conflict with the idea presented by Kim and Mauborgne in their book *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005). Companies heading to blue oceans do not compare themselves to their competitors. The goal is not to exceed competitors, it is to make competing meaningless. *Blue Ocean Strategy* presents two kinds of oceans, the red ones that could be said to be a part of traditional business making and the blue ones that concentrate on finding completely new markets. On the red oceans companies operating on the same field of business focus on exceeding their competitors; the limits of different branches are defined and accepted and companies know the rules of competition. This, however, pushes too many similar products and services to the market and thus results in decreasing the possibilities of companies to increase profit and growth. On red oceans competing is brutal and the aim is to leave competitors behind. On blue oceans the aim is to find undiscovered market space, which results in generation of completely new kind of demand, which again results in increasing companies' possibilities to grow and make profit. Most blue oceans are established within the red oceans by expanding branch limits, and competing on blue oceans is not relevant since there are no established rules concerning the business operations. (Kim–Mauborgne 2005, 24-25, 33).

There are different reasons for starting a product development process; desire to increase sales, change in the market situation, changes in customer behavior and changes in competition. Usually enhancing marketing communications alone is not enough to increase sales; in addition new or renewed products targeted to existing or new customers are needed. Often changes in the market situation of a company are not dependent on the company itself. For example, new demand can be generated in the markets and in that case it is important for companies to answer the demand by

developing new products. Nowadays, customer behavior may change very rapidly or easily. This means that suddenly the existing products and services are not enough to the customers anymore and product development has to take place to answer the changed demand. Also changes in the competitive situation are important reasons for starting product development. Unfortunately, companies often answer competition by copying the competitor's ideas instead of coming up with something completely new which could actually have far more positive effects on the development of the whole industry in hand. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 94-95.)

Product development project is a process that aims to productization of a product idea. Product development can be seen in different forms. It can generate completely new products, enhance the already existing products and generate fresh solutions for operations and services of the company. Often, companies seem to go with the flow and their product development focuses mostly on small enhancements and developing products by relying on the prevalent industrial trends. Nevertheless, companies should encourage themselves more to seize the challenge of coming up with new and radical concepts, which could strengthen their competitive position. (Kylänen 2005, 52.)

### **3.2 Product Development Processes of Tourism Companies**

There are differences in developing a concrete product and developing a service. The models describing the development process of a concrete product can be quite formal and thus it may be difficult to apply these rather linear models to service development. Services can be very different from each other so it is challenging to create one model that would be suitable for all service development processes; thus it would be worthwhile to come up with development models designed for different industries. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 97.) Tourism is a dynamic industry and characterized by rapid changes. When a tourism company is well aware of its mission and vision and every employee from sales to operations knows the business idea by heart, products can be developed to reflect the company's

strengths. When a company knows its customers and value their individual needs and preferences, the customers can be provided with the right products; the right modules and services are chosen from the whole product range to suit each customer's requests.

Next I will briefly describe the product development process of a tourism company as it is presented by Komppula and Boxberg (2005).

The first stage is developing the service concept. Service concept is based on customer needs and it describes the very core of a tourism product; what kind of value the customer expects to be received and how the company creates settings for the experience. When developing the service concept, companies should take different matters into account; one being that the ideation of the content of the core product should start from analyzing the value received by the customer. Before the analysis is possible, customers' needs and expectations regarding the value have to be understood. When starting product development, it is essential to remember that the product has to be targeted to certain customer group and for a specific purpose. Product development cannot be based on the idea that every product is suitable for every customer. Products sold to business customers (companies or organizations) are often customized according to the situation and the current needs of the customer. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 99-101.)

The value received by the customer is not the only matter to be taken into consideration in the first stage of product development. Target group's willingness and ability to participate is another subject to think about. Different resources like time, money and physical and mental resources, affect how actively or passively the customer him or herself contributes to the production of the tourism product. After analyzing the value customer should receive, the customer needs, and how actively the customer is able to participate in the product, the tourism company should start considering their own resources; do they have everything that is needed for successfully producing the new service or product. This, however, does not mean that the resources of one individual company should be enough; through cooperation and specialization companies can offer more versatile products and services

to consumers. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 101-102.) As stated before, customer needs and behavior can change very rapidly. To be fulfilled, the changing customer needs and wishes require strong cooperation from tourism companies. When different actors in tourism dominated region combine their forces, an innovative, flexible and competitive tourism region can be formed. (Kylänen 2005, 55.) Through this cooperation the whole area and thus different companies operating on the area can gain a strong and competitive position on the market.

Having a great core idea for a new product is not enough. The next step is to start designing the actual content of the product. For instance, if the service concept is to pamper and provide relaxation for a busy business customer the content of the product could include for example different treatments, a relaxing moment in sauna and a delicious dinner. (See Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 102.)

The design of the service concept is followed by development of a service process. Tourism products are built from pieces, service modules, and it is essential for these modules to be combined smoothly so that the product works well as a whole and delivers the expected value to the customer. Even though it is important that the product works well as a whole and pieces are put together in the right way, customer does not necessarily have same kind of expectations regarding every module. For instance, customer looking forward to an adventurous extreme holiday probably does not expect luxury accommodation. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 103.) When considering customers of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North who travel to Finland to see for instance huskies and reindeer, it may be that being accommodated at the most expensive and luxurious hotel in town is not their first priority.

Blueprinting is another stage in service process development. Service blueprint displays all stages included in the service module; the ones where customer interacts with the service provider, customer service functions, and operations enabling the production of the whole process. The latter is often referred to as actions which the customer does not see, the ones taking place on the background. When blueprinting has been done for every service

module of the product, follows the testing phase. Blueprints form product prototypes for companies contributing to the production of the product. Before starting to market the new product to customers, all modules of which it is formed should be tested. Testing can be done with the help of the company's staff members or for instance friends of the staff members. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 104-108.)

According to Komppula and Boxberg (2005, 110) one stage in service process development is financial analysis. Sometimes other stages in product development are gone through more thoroughly than financial analysis which indeed is a key issue in the process. Other phases in product development can be relatively easy and convenient for the company to conduct but the financial side can be analyzed rather superficially and too little attention is paid to it. Thus, this phase should not be downplayed at all.

When the product service process description is completed, follows the first stage related to the actual marketing communications of the product. Tourism products are often presented to customers in brochures or written offers. When presented to customers, service modules of the tourism product are often displayed in a way that also emphasizes matters related to customer expectations. Product descriptions should create images and present the value that the product presumably delivers to the customer. Sometimes same product descriptions and brochures are not suitable for both, end-users and intermediaries; usually intermediaries require more detailed and specific information than individual customers. In addition to the sales material, business customers often prefer personal selling (customer service) so it may be challenging to sell a product to groups by using only brochures. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 111-112.)

When the new tourism product is considered to be ready and the designing phase completed, follows testing of the product. Testing should be done in two stages; first the product is presented to potential customers and when suitable test groups are recruited, the product can be tested in practice. Testing with external contributors has two purposes; it can be found out whether or not something about the product ought to be enhanced or



changed and, on the other hand, the new product can be marketed through testing. Before a group is invited to test the product, it should be made sure that the product indeed is in its final form. This means that especially technical and safety-related issues have been taken care of. From a tourism company's perspective, it is important that the testing situation is as real as it can be. The company should gather a test group in a way that it represents well the product's desired target group and that the group is really motivated and interested in the type of the product in hand. Good motivation often generates constructive feedback that can help the company to develop and enhance the product. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 112, 114.)

The final phase in a tourism product development process is the launching of the product to chosen target groups and monitoring how well it does in the market. It is essential that the product is launched and presented in a way that is appealing to new customers. It is usual that the launching of a new tourism product relies mainly on offers and personal selling, and if the product does not succeed it is often just forgotten especially if not too much resources has been put into the development. In case a product fails, it would be extremely beneficial to try to find out why it did not succeed. (Komppula–Boxberg 2005, 114-115.)

These product development phases probably describe the development of a new product, and they are processes defined especially for the tourism industry. Nevertheless, often product development focuses on developing already existing products or altering them to meet customer preferences. In this case, as well as in possibly many other product development projects even within the tourism industry, the above described product development processes are not necessarily to be followed very into detail. As stated before, tourism as an industry is dynamic and exposed to change so every product development project can be different (see García-Rosell et al. 2007). The cornerstones to be remembered in product development, however, are the emphasis on customer value creation and developing products and services in a way that utilizes the knowledge and knowhow of the company to the greatest possible extent.

### 3.3 Customer Orientation in Product Development

Product Development and Management Association (PDMA) defines customer as someone who purchases your firm's products or services (PDMA 2010). Customer can be either a company or an individual (von Koskull 2009, 3). Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North offers a wide range of products and services targeted to different kinds of customers, and specialized teams deal with these different customer groups, which ensures that the customers receive the best possible high quality service.

Conducting business in a customer oriented way is claimed to be one of the cornerstones of today's business. The ability and willingness to focus on customers' needs is the factor that ultimately separates the companies who are so to speak the top of their league from other companies. Answering to customer needs will increase the level of satisfaction and as a result the commitment levels of customers. (Aalto 2010, 16.) However, this thought could be said to present the traditional view on marketing. Nowadays different views on for instance the customer's role challenge this traditional thought.

Learning about customer wants and needs ensures that the company's products really are designed so that they correspond to customers' wishes. Conducting product development by relying on customers will provide customers with additional value compared to competitors' products. (Aalto 2010, 17.)

However, does the customer always know what he or she wants? It may be quite a lot easier for the customer to share development ideas and propositions concerning existing products when he or she has experienced them, easier than come up with completely new product ideas. I consider this as one of the biggest challenges in customer orientation of product development; to what extent is the customer able to share development ideas? For instance, a tourist coming from Spain to see the northern lights in Finnish Lapland most likely does not have a clue about into what kind of program the northern lights could be included, without any previous

experience. To conclude, it can be difficult to demand something that one has no information or experience of.

Socio-cultural factors play an important role in the tourism industry. Tourism products and services always take place in some sort of cultural environment and thus the local culture of the tourism host region, the consumption culture, and the production culture are factors that ought not to be seen as separate but as contributors that are tied together in tourism product development. The fresh socio-cultural insight to tourism product development presented by García-Rosell et al. (2007), places great emphasis on the development of the already existing products, too. Not only the new product or service development should be taken into consideration when discussing tourism product development. (García-Rosell et al. 2007, 449,454.) Again, the experiences and knowledge of the customers may be utilized in the development of the already existing products. It should not be assumed that customers always know what they want and are able to demand it.

### **3.4 Customer Information**

Market information is a wider concept than customer information. Market information includes information about customers, competitors and government regulations whereas customer information presents service related perceptions and behaviors of the customer. Here, perceptions refer to the thoughts and feelings of the customer, and behavior to the actions of the customer. Customer information provides views on for instance the wants, needs, values, preferences, ideas and purchase behavior of the customer. (von Koskull 2009, 3-4.) Perhaps the never ending search of customer information downplays the importance of more extensive market information.

A significant part of this customer information is in tacit form. Despite the amount of trend reports and research literature, customer information often is possessed by people and within routines. Tacit knowledge means the kind of knowledge that employees possess and use to get through the day without really realizing it. It has been concluded that 90 percent of the knowledge in

any organization exists in people's minds; the knowledge is very automatic and using it does not really require any thought. Tacit knowledge can be said to be something that people know but cannot express in words, or know how to do something without even thinking about it. This silent kind of knowledge or know-how is visualized when finding creative or innovative solutions to problems by using specific expertise. (Smith 2001, 311, 314, 315.)

### **3.5 Gathering and Use of Customer Information in Development Work**

There is a general agreement that collecting and using customer information in development work is important. Despite this, only a limited amount of research has been conducted to find out how the customer data is actually used in development processes. If information about customers is collected but not later used in development projects, the process of acquiring the data ends up to be simply expensive and useless activity. (von Koskull 2009, 2.)

Information received from a market research can be processed through conceptual use or instrumental use. In von Koskull's thesis (2009) the use of customer information is understood as instrumental use. Instrumental use refers to more action oriented type of use whereas conceptual use refers more to learning. In her thesis, von Koskull (2009) focused on studying the use of customer information in development process of a bank's website so the study is positioned within service marketing and management and more specifically, service development. As a result, the thesis presents six types of customer information use, of which two belong to *use* category and four to *non-use* category. (von Koskull 2009, 6, 8, 84-85.)

The two types of customer information use belonging to the use category deal with timing. The first is about immediate use and the second is called almost postponed use. In immediate use customer information is used within the timeframe of the development process in hand. In the almost postponed use, customer information was originally planned to be used in future development projects but just before the current development process was finalized, information was decided to use. (von Koskull 2009, 84-85.)

The four types of customer information use belonging to the non-use category are named as postponed use, almost use, potential use and immediate non-use. In the postponed use developers considered customer information to be important but due to shortage in resources, such as time, the usage was postponed to future development. In the almost use -type, developers first had the intention to use the information in the project but due to some emerged problems it was not used after all. In the potential use, acquisition of customer information was postponed time after time and finally the information was not used in development even though first intended. Finally, the immediate non-use refers to a situation where customer information was never intended to use in development even though it was within the reach of the development team. (von Koskull 2009, 85.)

It is rather unfortunate to learn that only two types belonging to the use category of customer information use were established in von Koskull's research (2009) and as many as four types belonging to the non-use category were found. One of the most important aspects of my thesis was to find out how customer information is used in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North; I hope that my thesis encourages the company to start emphasizing, or encourage them to perhaps emphasize even more, the importance of customer information in product and service development and make the use of customer information in these processes more efficient.

One of the goals of my thesis was to find out how customer information is used in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. Since I was not able to follow a specific product or service development process of the company I will not relate the research information about the previously mentioned subject to the above mentioned types of customer information use or non-use established by von Koskull (2009). My goal was to find out what happens to customer information in product development projects of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North; whether or not this information is used and how it is used. I hope the following analyses encourages the company to emphasize the significance of customer information in their product

development projects since there is a general agreement that using customer information in product and service development is of great importance.

There are different ways of gaining customer information; it can be *from* the customer through market research or *about* the customer. Information about customers can exist in the company without the company really taking the biggest possible advantage of it. For example, frontline personnel often possess very valuable information about different customer groups since they interact with the customers every day. Also, customer information can so to speak surface when developers of a company turn to themselves and as a result of speculation create customer information. (von Koskull 2009, 4.) One of the goals of my thesis was to study this kind of silent customer information by interviewing employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North.

### **3.6 Meetings Industry**

One of the goals of my thesis was to provide Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North with a tool to develop their products and services targeted to business customers. By interviewing four employees, I formed a view on what makes a good meeting or which are the factors that should especially be taken into consideration when designing products for meeting customers.

Business tourism is a term used to describe work-related travelling. Business travel has always been one of the most significant forms of travel and it has been divided into four categories; general business travel, meetings industry, trade fairs and exhibitions and incentive travel. (Blinnikka–Kuha 2004, 16.) The sub category of business tourism that is the most significant for my thesis is meetings industry. Internationally, the term meetings industry is often referred to as MICE (meetings, incentives, conventions, exhibitions), MCE (meetings, conventions, exhibitions) or CEMI (conventions, exhibitions, meetings, incentives) (Blinnikka–Kuha 2004, 17). In my thesis I will not discuss these three terms more thoroughly since the meeting perspective is the most significant for this study.

The category meetings industry includes all travel that is done for participating in a meeting or congress. It can also refer to a trip that includes participating in a meeting or congress. The occasion that is participated during the business trip can be either national or international and it can be a meeting for only a few people or a congress for hundreds or even thousands of participants. Participating in meetings or congresses is business tourism when the occasion is organized outside the company in hand and when services from different traditional areas of the tourism industry are needed. (Verhelä 2000, 18.)

Business trips are often compulsory; the traveler does not get to choose whether to travel or not. Maybe due to this, business tourists often have higher standards or they are more demanding than leisure tourists. On business trips everything should function smoothly since people taking the trips do not have the energy to worry about possible setbacks in arrangements. (Verhelä 2000, 14.) This should be beared in mind and emphasized when designing services and products, such as meetings, targeted to business customers.

A significant difference between leisure travel and business travel is the question of who pays the trip. When considering business travel, the one that makes the travel decision and pays the work-related trip is not necessarily the one who travels and to turn around, the person who takes the trip does not pay for it him or herself. Other factors that are common in business travel are that the employer (presumably the payer of the trip) and the job itself affect significantly the choice of destination, when the trip is taken, and the duration of the trip. Employer is usually liable to pay salary or other compensation for the work done on the trip and for time used for travelling, too. (Kantele, 2006, 26-27.)

## **4 CONDUCTING THE CASE STUDY AT VILLI POHJOLA – ERÄSETTI WILD NORTH**

### **4.1 Purpose and Goal of the Research**

With this thesis I hope to present a fresh view on handling customer information in a tourism company. The areas I am studying are

- the collection of customer information
- how customer information is used in the company's product development

And

- what do the employees already know about meeting customers and what makes a good meeting service or product.

The goal of this thesis is to find out how customer information, in general, is gathered at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, how it is used in product development and what kind of information the employees of the company already possess relating to meeting customers. Hopefully, the thesis helps the company to develop their product development processes and products and services targeted to meeting customers.

Interviews were used to acquire information on how customer information is gathered by the company, how this information is used in product development processes and also to document some of the perhaps tacit information (see Räsänen 2010, 15) existing within the company about meeting customers. On one hand I will gather information on how the company collects customer information and on the other hand document the information some of the employees already possess about meeting customers.

### **4.2 Research Questions**

The main research question is

- How is customer information collected and used in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North?



This research problem is divided into sub questions which are:

- What do employees already know about meeting customers?
- What happens to customer information in the product development process?

And

- What makes a good meeting?

### **4.3 Case Study Method**

Case study method is multidimensional and it has been exposed to change through time. Research questions, research frame and data analyses are based on the definition of the case or cases at hand. (Eriksson–Koistinen 2005, 1.) Using the case study method in qualitative research can contribute to gaining a comprehensive view on the examined phenomenon or matter. Applying the case study method has enabled me to study a phenomenon in its real environment and the method can provide information on how and why things happen. It could be said that the goal of this case study was to focus on a specific case and gain a good understanding of it. However, there are some limitations as to can the analysis of a case study really be generalized. (See Noor 2008, 1602.)

One case study focuses on only one or a few cases and thus the generalization issue can be evident (Veal 2006, 109). On the other hand, this is not a problem; in my research the goal was to focus on the customer information, product development and meeting customer segment related matters at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and not necessarily come up with universally generalizable conclusions. The data gathering method I chose to use in my case study was qualitative thematic interviews conducted with four employees of the company. However, qualitative methods are not necessarily the only ones to be used in case studies; case studies can be based on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative material as well (Veal 2006, 108). More about qualitative research and thematic and semi-structured interviews follows in chapter 4.4.

#### 4.4 Thematic and Semi-Structured Interviews

A distinction can be made between two general research types; quantitative and qualitative method. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to discuss these two as completely separate subjects and sometimes a so called semi-qualitative method is used. Here, qualitative factors are included in quantitative research field. (Rope 2000, 423.) At one point in my thesis process I intended to use both quantitative and qualitative research methods but later when the final definitions and limitations for the study were made, I came to the conclusion that the qualitative method is the most suitable one for the purpose of my thesis. I used thematic interviews as the data acquiring method, since it enabled me to go through certain themes and study the perceptions and ideas of each interviewee (see Hirsjärvi–Hurme 2004, 47-48).

Qualitative research helps *understanding* the examined object, for example consumer or company, and the reasons for its behavior and decisions. This research method usually gives answers to questions like *why* and *how*. One of the most important factors separating qualitative method from quantitative method is that the sample size in qualitative research is usually small. The goal of this research method is to find out the explanatory factors to examined problems. (Rope 2000, 423.) This goes hand in hand with the goal of my thesis. I wanted to learn and understand how customer information is handled (in product development in particular) at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and make conclusions about the subject related to this case study.

By using qualitative research method, so called rich information can be gathered. As stated before, unlike in quantitative research method, usually the sample size is rather small; only a few cases may be examined. In earlier days, it was not very common to use qualitative approach in tourism research but today the approach is widely accepted and probably at least as common as quantitative approach. When implementing a qualitative method in research, often a more flexible approach is needed. Whereas quantitative research often, but not always, progresses following certain steps, in qualitative research different research processes can be conducted simultaneously, not necessarily as sequential steps. (Veal 2006, 193-197.)

As stated above, when conducting a research by using the qualitative research method, often only a few cases are examined. In my case, what comes to the nature of the research conducted for my thesis, not more than four persons were interviewed to gain hopefully versatile enough data regarding the examined subjects.

The most frequently used qualitative methods for collecting data are group discussions, individual interviews, in-depth interviews, projective tests and observing. When the results gained through qualitative research start to repeat themselves it can be considered that there are enough answers and that the data gathering work can be finished. This is referred to as saturation. (Rope 2000, 423.)

In order to be able to answer my research questions, I chose to conduct thematic interviews with employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. Thematic interview is a form of semi-structured interview and it could be said that it is closer to unstructured than structured interview. The themes that are covered when conducting the interviews are same for all interviewees but there are not necessarily specific questions as in other semi-structured interviews. Also, thematic interview is far different from structured survey interviews but it is not completely free as in-depth interviews. (Hirsjärvi–Hurme 2004, 47-48.) So it could be concluded that it is something in between structured and unstructured interviews and a very conversation-like situation. In thematic interviews it is important to ensure that all themes defined before the interviews are covered. Going through these themes is still done in a kind of relaxed way and the order in which they are covered may vary from interview to interview. Also, since there are no ready given answer alternatives the scope of the answers may vary a lot; some answers are wider than others and someone may talk more about a given theme than someone else. (Eskola–Vastamäki 2007, 27-28.)

In thematic interviews only a checklist is used to make sure that all intended subjects are covered, there are no specific questions (Eskola–Vastamäki 2007, 28). I considered this method to be the most relevant for the subjects examined in my thesis because by using it I was able to go through the

necessary themes but still let the interviewees express themselves quite freely. Nevertheless, since I was conducting thematic interviews for the first time, I did use also specific questions in each interview to ensure that as much significant information was received as possible. Since one of the interviews was conducted over the phone, the nature of that one conversation was a bit different from the other three interviews and there the specific questions played quite an important and big role. When conducting the interviews it was truly interesting to note how versatile the answers can be. Even though the themes and main subjects stayed pretty much the same through every interview, regardless of a few additions to the original interview frame, the answers were versatile and in my opinion included interesting points of view. The atmosphere in the interviews was quite relaxed but still kind of matter-of-fact. I had a feeling that the interviewees were quite eager to help me with my work and somewhat motivated to participate to the research. Of course, the perceived motivation level varied to some extent from interview to interview and it appeared that some interviewees were more outspoken than others.

As the goal of my thesis was to understand through research the handling of customer information at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and what do the meeting customers of the company prioritize, I am satisfied with my choice of research method. The interviewing process taught me a lot about the world of research and interviewing; from the practical arrangements to transcribing the material. My contact person at the commissioner's end chose the interviewees and there were four of them. One of the interviews was conducted over the phone and three other ones personally at the work place of each interviewee. I believe that the research material I gained through the interviews will give a good picture on the studied subjects and hopefully enable delivering comprehensive enough analyses.

#### **4.5 Process Description**

The research I conducted to obtain answers to my research questions was a qualitative case study. Case study method was a convenient one for the

purpose of my thesis; it gave me a comprehensive view on the product development, customer information use and meeting customer related issues at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. My goal was to gain a good understanding regarding these subjects at this particular company rather than study them in general and thus the analysis can only be generalized to a certain extent.

The research method I applied in this study was thematic interviews. The frame for the interviews was constructed in a way that it would cover all the main research problems, and provide versatile information about them (the interview frame can be found both in English and Finnish as appendix). When interviewing, I aimed to first cover the customers of the company and then proceed to the three main themes; the collection of customer information, product development and meeting customers. The interviewees were employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North working in central positions regarding product development. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the work place of each interviewee and one of them was conducted over the phone due to practical arrangements. All interviews were recorded to make the analyzing phase easier and more efficient. The four interviews were conducted in approximately three weeks and I decided that four interviews would be enough to provide versatile information and my thesis project schedule defined the number of interviews to some extent as well. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, so the interview quotations presented in chapters 5 and 6 are translations.

After the interviews were conducted and the recordings saved on computer, they were transcribed. Transcribing was quite a demanding work but on the other hand I was able to familiarize myself with the material while doing it. Finally, when I had all the interviews in written form I started the analyzing phase little by little. First, I defined a color code for four separate themes; the customers, collection of customer information, product development and the meeting customers. Then I went through each interview underlining the most significant points in each defined theme with the appropriate color and by making notes.

After going through the interview material in the above described manner, I continued arranging the material a bit further. I made four separate word documents for different themes; customers, customer information, product development and meeting customers. Thus, I had all the material of each theme in one document which made it easier to start analyzing the material theme by theme; I had all data regarding a given subject in one place. Again, I continued by underlining important points in the texts. Little by little the analyzing phase progressed like this, by reading the interview material, underlining and making notes. As a whole, my data analysis followed the logic of content analysis, in particular thematization, where I organized data on the basis of themes and categories (see e.g. Hirsjärvi–Hurme, 141-142, 173).

## **5 CUSTOMER INFORMATION AND MEETING CUSTOMERS**

### **5.1 Customers of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North**

The clientele of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North consists of three vaster groups that can be again divided into smaller sub groups. The three main customer groups are domestic private customers, domestic business customers and groups and finally, international customers. There are specified teams for all these three main customer groups, which ensures the best possible and specialized service for customers with different needs, wishes and aims concerning the trip.

One of the most important customer groups at least from the financial point of view is the one consisting of private domestic customers. These customers are independent so services, such as catering, are not usually included in the products sold to them. They mostly rent cabins and buy for instance hunting and fishing permits. It is common that for instance a group of friends or relatives, families and couples rent a cabin to enjoy clean and peaceful Finnish nature. A group that is currently also growing are retiring couples; they have time and financial resources to take trips. A significant matter that separates the company's domestic private customers and domestic groups is that the person who orders the service or product for a group or a company does not pay for it him or herself and a private customer does. Hence, when the customer is a company or group the amount of money that can be spent on one purchase is bigger than in the case of private customers.

The team specialized in domestic business customers and groups handle different kinds of companies, organizations, unions and associations. The group sizes can vary from smaller to bigger ones and these customers purchase for instance services and products relating to meetings, workplace health promotion (TYKY) and recreation; the purpose of the trip is different than the one of private customers. Also, a number of domestic incentive trips are organized. As Kantele (2006) has stated, business trips are not usually booked and paid by the person who actually takes the trip. Here lies one of the biggest differences between independent private customers and business

customers; the service is paid by the company in the case of business travelers whereas a private customer usually pays him or herself. Priorities and characteristics of meeting customers are discussed more in depth in chapter 5.2.

People interested in different activities, such as fishing or photography, can also purchase products and services from Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North as a group. They can for instance rent a cabin in a suitable location regarding their hobby and gather there together. The product range for this kind of activity groups is of great diversity at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North; the company operates nationwide and has cabins in several different kinds of locations.

When viewed from the financial point of view, the international customers are somewhat in the same position as private domestic customers. International customers come from abroad and the group mainly consists of tour operators and travel agencies who bring international tourists to Finland, and also of individual private customers. The international department of the company focuses on providing customers coming from abroad with memorable and unique experiences in Finnish nature. Even though some domestic incentive travel is organized too, the main part of tourists taking incentive trips comes from other countries. One of the most significant issues what comes to incentive travel is to provide the customer with a unique experience. As concluded by Verhelä and Lackman (2003), the tourism service provider cannot directly deliver a meaningful experience to the customer but only provide the settings for one to take place. The realization of a meaningful experience deals a lot with whether or not the customer expectations are met.

Even though the three main customer groups; domestic private customers, domestic business customers and groups and international customers are all different from each other and the purpose of the trip usually different kind in the case of different groups, there are also similarities between the three main groups. The customer service processes are organized at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North in a way that these different kinds of customers receive



the best possible service from a specialized person but a central matter that all customers of the company seek is the exploration of Finnish nature. Whether it was an international tourist group travelling to Finnish Lapland or a Finnish family renting a cabin, the matter that links the customers of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North together is nature-orientation.

*“It is nature, nature-based tourism and, and the nature values that we are able to offer. And we are the only actor in Finland, the kind of actor that we can offer wilderness travel and, and hunting and fishing related guided programs and, and also guidance for hiking. - - - so, it is the nature travel- - -.” I4*

The purpose of the trip can be very different for different customers but as the company is the nature tourism service provider of Finnish Metsähallitus, all the services and products are built around clean and peaceful Finnish nature. Even though the purpose of a meeting trip may be business related, the customers usually seek a special kind of meeting service that does not concentrate on sitting formally in a classroom. The nature aspect is always present in one way or another.

## **5.2 Priorities and Characteristics of Meeting Customers**

Even though tacit knowledge has a lot to do with action; knowing what to do without really thinking about it, I related this concept to finding out what employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North know about their meeting customers. A lot of customer information probably exists inside the employees' minds and I tried to examine and document this information so that it could be used in the product development projects of the company. People working in a service company, communicating with customers on daily basis can possess a tremendous amount of information that has not really been documented. For this thesis I hoped to gather and present this kind of information about meeting customers.

A research shows that regardless of the demanding economic situation, developing personal relationships is vital in business making. Building and maintaining these relationships may be impossible without face-to-face

meetings, so the importance of these “traditional” meetings seems to be acknowledged. (e-tid.com 2009.) According to an interviewee, meeting services are a product range that is sold a lot at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North what comes to the amount. Meetings industry is a part of business tourism that is rapidly growing (Verhelä 2000, 18) and this is one of the reasons why I wanted to explore the meeting customer segment of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North more in depth than other customer segments.

Meeting customer group of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North consists mainly of Finnish companies buying different kinds of meeting packages. The size of a meeting group varies typically from a little less than ten persons to several dozens of people. Meeting customers can of course be also international companies but the request for offer comes from the Finnish actor of the organization but there are more than often foreign participants at the meetings. It is not common that a foreign company would buy a meeting service from Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and travel to Finland just to have a meeting. When this seldom happens, though, the meeting products provided are similar to the ones sold to Finnish meeting customers. Some sorts of meeting arrangements are always included also in incentive trips, since in several countries there are regulations regarding matters as this.

A significant matter characterizing the meeting services of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North is that the meeting trips often last at least one night, so they usually are over-night travel. The company does not have a competitive advantage on the day meeting sector since some of the destinations for business customers are situated in somewhat remote locations and thus already travelling to the destination takes time. Most of the meeting packages the company sells include a stay at one of the company’s own resorts and one of the biggest advantages Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North has is that it operates nationwide so there is probably a destination for every taste. There are resorts suitable for business customers all around the country so a location in northern Lapland can certainly provide something different than a location in southern Finland.

When a company reserves a meeting service from Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, it is made sure that the meeting group has the peace and quiet in the destination. The resorts are always reserved for one group at a time so that the customers have the best possible surroundings to work; having the resort all to themselves, the group is able to have meetings without any distractions which is one of the most valued matters what comes to the meeting services of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The completely private business destinations are special when compared to for instance hotels where there often are meeting facilities as well.

*“ - - the main reason for choosing the Wild Meeting of Villi Pohjola is the meeting resort in own peace and quiet without distractions. - - there is only one group at a time at the resort. - - - one can take a break by going outside and walk in the nature - - -.” 13*

Often some sort of technology is needed at meetings and there may be certain preferences a meeting group has regarding the equipment at the meeting resort. This is a challenge for some of the meeting locations of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North; when a resort is in a bit remote location it is obvious that for instance cell phones do not work as well or the internet connections function as well as in bigger centers. On the other hand, one of the interviewees stated that meeting customers see this also as a positive matter; the participants are able to focus completely on the subjects discussed and they are not for instance checking their e-mail all the time during the meeting. To conclude, this may even facilitate the concentration a meeting may require.

As with any type of tourism products, it is essential that what has been promised to the customer is delivered. Here, good communication among different actors within the organization could not be emphasized enough. Before at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, the chain started from the sales personnel who made the deal with the customer after which the sales department informed the operations team about what the customer has booked and finally the operations team ordered the needed services from different partners. Now, to ensure that the customer receives everything that he or she has agreed on with the sales person, the sales person forwards all

the information directly to the partners. This shows a kind of development that has been done at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North to ensure that customers receive the best possible service. It is essential that all actors contributing to the customer experience are well informed and act and work in a way that has been promised to the customer.

The meeting packages of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North are compiled of pieces. When making a deal with the customers, the sales person has a challenging and demanding role; he or she should find out the real purpose of the trip and what the customer hopes to achieve by the trip. Customers can also receive all possible alternatives for instance regarding catering or activities before-hand so that when the deal is made it is easier for him or her to comprehend what is possible and offered and thus contribute to the chosen meeting product or service. The products are always designed based on the customer's wishes and preferences.

*“- - - in a way we have divided into modules well, so we can make very different kinds of meetings- - - the customer can take only the resort or then also services. There are menus for foods, proposals for programs. So from these, the pieces the customer has requested are chosen.” I1*

Lately, when the financial situation has been demanding all over the world, the effects have been seen also at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. For instance, the company has developed new shorter activity programs for business customers since companies have been forced to cut down some expenses due to the challenging economic circumstances. When business and meeting customers have not been or are not able to buy longer programs, Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North has developed these new shorter ones to answer the current demand. As Borg et al. (2002) have stated it is important to be able to match the company's own production to what customers want and when Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North developed their programs designed for business customers, this is exactly what took place; existing products were altered so that the customer wishes could be fulfilled.

*“Well, there is that, in a way I have seen how it lives by economic trends, so at the moment we are not yet living in a time that there would be a lot of activities but exactly this kind of short programs, small activities, these are used quite a lot.” I4*

As Komppula and Boxberg (2005) have stated product development should be a continuous process and this has been taken into consideration at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The above described case of adapting to the changed business customers' needs displays this kind of way of thinking but it was stated that perhaps the services offered to meeting customers could be developed even further. As several of the resorts targeted to business customers have not originally been designed for meeting use there may be some challenges what comes to the resorts and their development as well. As some customers are starting to demand more and more from the locations it could be that some of these locations may require some refurbishing and altering. The challenge here is that bigger renovations require bigger amounts of money and it is not always possible to make these kinds of efforts. On the other hand, this challenge with some of the business resorts can be overcome with right kind of marketing. If the sales message is stated in a proper way perhaps certain kinds of customers will find certain kinds of resorts. And again, even if the resort is not the most luxurious one, the quality standards have to be met and what has been promised to the customer has to be delivered.

Several matters contribute to a good meeting. First of all, everything Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North has promised to the customer buying a meeting service has to be delivered. It could be said to be one of the cornerstones of a good meeting service that the communication within the organization providing the service works in a way that the information is distributed so that the customer receives what he or she has ordered. As one of the interviewees put it:

*“Well first of all, the most important thing is that the entirety works well, even though it consists of different pieces.” I1*

Since meetings always require certain kind of concentration from the participants, one of the most important matters Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild

North provides regarding this, is complete privacy for one group at a time at a resort. A factor contributing to the uniqueness of the meeting services and products offered by the company is that the business resorts are located close to nature. This ensures the peace and quiet for meeting customers and provides them with the possibility to relax and take a break when needed during the trip. Often the meeting customers purchasing from Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North aim to experience something different and not only concentrate on business and the company is able to deliver this kind of detachment from the everyday life.

As Verhelä (2000) has stated, it is essential that everything works well and smoothly on a business trip. Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North is able to provide easy meeting services for their customers. After the sales person has received all necessary information, for instance regarding the number of participants, catering and programs wanted, from the meeting customer, the customer should not have to worry about a thing and the group arriving to the meeting resort can expect everything to go as planned. However, the agreed schedule has to be flexible as well when needed. Of course, it is significant that at the customer's end information is also shared and forwarded; the person booking the trip is usually an assistant not participating in the trip. It is vital that the person booking the meeting informs the participants in a proper way so that it is clear to everyone what is going to happen, when and where.

### **5.3 Collection of Customer Information**

Throughout my thesis I have used the word *information* not *knowledge* associated to customers (tacit knowledge excluded). However, there is a difference between these two concepts and through certain kind of processing it could be said that the customer information gathered by Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North can transform into knowledge. Information could be said to be one-dimensional, for instance a document that can be distributed to anyone as it is (Prusak 2006, 19). In the case of my commissioner it could perhaps be said that a customer satisfaction survey brings customer information but does not transform into knowledge as it is.

Knowledge is generated through processing of information for instance in practice and it is the factor that enables companies to develop new products (Prusak 2006, 19). Perhaps, when collecting for instance customer feedback, the feedback could be said to be information but when it is studied and applied it may turn into knowledge.

Customer information is emphasized to a great extent at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and the company is willing to be active and proactive when it comes to gathering information about and from their customers (see von Koskull 2009). Not only is new information gathered continuously from the customers but probably all members of the personnel possess great deal of tacit knowledge that guides them through everyday business functions. The meaning of tacit knowledge is emphasized especially in action; employees apply the tacit knowledge they possess into practice (Tywoniak 2007, 61-62) when knowing what to do or how to act in certain situations without really even thinking about it.

Tacit knowledge accumulates through experience. When a person works with similar kinds of cases for long enough, experience and thus knowledge piles up. Employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North working with customers communicate with them all the time. Through this communication a lot of silent information about customers' wishes and wants may surface but it is not necessarily documented anywhere. On one hand, every employee needs this kind of information that "just exists" in his or her mind but on the other hand one of the interviewees pointed out that it would be beneficial for the whole organization if this kind of information was documented. If absolutely everything that comes up during individual conversations with customers would be documented on the customer database of the company it would be accessible for anyone.

However, it may be difficult to define what should be documented, since obviously if absolutely everything was documented the amount of data could be too much to handle. However, in documenting tacit information the sales system, or the customer database Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North uses in its operations could play an important role. The challenge here is that it is

claimed that tacit knowledge cannot necessarily be explained and can only be transferred from one person to another during a long period of time, for instance during apprenticeship. Sometimes, the tacit type of knowledge may only be utilized by the person who possesses it. However, it has been concluded that a lot of the knowledge existing within an organization is tacit and remains in the employees' minds since it may be impossible to document all significant aspects for successful operations. (Madhavan–Grover 1998, 1, 2.) Thus, even though it might be beneficial to transform the tacit knowledge existing in people's minds into knowledge that would be accessible to the whole company, it may be impossible. Tacit knowledge will still contribute to the business operations since it is used by employees all the time.

In addition to turning to the silent information possessed by the employees, there are several other channels to collect information from and about the customers.

*“- - - customer information... - - -. It accumulates straight from being in contact with the customers, from conversations had with the customers, on the phone in the sales situation but also from the meetings with the customers. It accumulates from the customer events that are organized since there wishes, ideas and thoughts surface. It accumulates from the feedback that is collected. - - - and from customer surveys we have had for instance on fairs.” I3*

When a customer approaches the company with a purchase, for instance a meeting product in mind, it is not necessarily only the current deal that is discussed. During these conversations for instance with business customers, there is a great opportunity to talk also about how the company is doing and how its future prospects look like. This is how valuable customer information can be gathered not only for an individual deal but also for the future. Also feedback about previous sales and current wishes can be read even between the lines during these personal conversations. All interviewees mentioned these personal conversations with customers as one of the most important channels of gathering customer information.



Special attention is paid on key customers especially on the business customer sector. A fresh tool for communicating with key business customers and potential customers is a kind of development discussion arranged once a year. These discussions are documented and attached to the customer information on the reservation system. This discussion regime has not been used too much yet, but could be a very valuable tool in the future. Another way of regarding the remarkable customers is actively asking feedback from them on the phone; when a group has used the company's services and products they are always asked for feedback.

Feedback in general could be said to be one of the most important channels for customer information at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. Feedback can be sought actively and there are several channels through which customers can freely give feedback.

*“Customer information, yes... - - - customer feedback through several different channels- - - we can actively ask feedback; send a form or guide the customer to give feedback on the internet in a certain place- - -.” I2*

It seems like the company is continuously developing and applying new channels for feedback. In the international team the collection of customer information is focused on the conversations the sales personnel has for instance with tour operators, and on feedback forms guides distribute to customers participating in safaris. Private customers for instance renting accommodation from Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North give a lot of personal feedback for instance when picking up the keys for the cabin. Feedback was clearly emphasized as an important channel of customer information collection but however, there were some differences in the perceptions of the amount of feedback material received.

Today, when technology has experienced major developments, internet is one of the most important platforms for collecting customer information. However, in the internet it could be said that the customer information comes in the form of feedback. There is a feedback form on the own website of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and also on the main Metsähallitus website. In

the future, the solutions of social media will probably play an important role in collecting customer information. Even though there are several feedback channels, customers should perhaps be activated more to give feedback independently since this kind of customer information is very significant to the company and all feedback material is processed. Also, if a feedback requires special attention, for instance a customer asks for compensation for some issue, it is always reported. Another way of acquiring information about the customers is different kinds of researches the company has conducted.

As customer information is gathered through different channels and it is fairly effectively documented, it plays an important role in the development of the existing products and services. The place where customer information is stored at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, is the internal information technology system of the company. A significant conclusion is that all customer feedback, even the one coming in spoken form, should be documented, so the storing of customer information could be said to be fairly organized within the company. Challenges regarding customer information are for instance the question of documenting tacit knowledge and how customers could be encouraged to independently give feedback even more through the different channels. However, the solution for documenting all kind of information and knowledge probably is the sales system the company uses, since it enables the search of different kinds of reports as it is. Anyhow, there perhaps ought to be common agreed guidelines on how the information surfacing for instance during the personal conversations with customers could be documented in the system. As stated before, every single detail cannot possibly be saved.

## 6 CUSTOMER INFORMATION IN PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

### 6.1 Product Development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North

Product development is advised to be a holistic and continuous process which takes different aspects into account simultaneously (Tourism Product Developer's Handbook 2010, 4). I presented the product development processes defined by Komppula and Boxberg (2005) in chapter 3.2 Product Development Processes of Tourism Companies but as stated, tourism is a dynamic industry where it may be almost impossible to define product development processes that would be suitable for all tourism companies or even for the ones operating on the same branch of tourism. By conducting interviews with four employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North working in central positions regarding product development, I wanted to explore the product development work of the company. Through the interviews I gained interesting information about how especially the product development team of the company operates and how customer information is taken into account in product development. The customer information aspect will be discussed more in depth in chapter 6.2.

There is a product development group at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North which consists of representatives from different units of the company. One of the most significant tools of the group is a web-based idea processing system. The system can be accessed by all actors within Metsähallitus and enables presenting all ideas regarding for instance product development in an environment where anyone they concern can see them. Members of the organization can for instance present ideas they have received by experiencing something somewhere else. The tool has not been in use at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North for too long yet, but will probably contribute to the product development of the company positively. The idea processing system is the channel through which employees of Metsähallitus, regardless of their unit, are able to present ideas knowing that they will be assessed. One of the interviewees pointed out the importance of the fact that since there is a common tool such this, it can result in more positive effects since employees know that the ideas presented there will be assessed and

everyone can see and comment them. One of the core ideas of the system is that even ideas that may at first seem a bit crazy should be shared; after somebody has written down an idea someone else may read it and develop it a bit further in the virtual environment and this is how great product ideas may be produced.

*“ - - the product development group has a big challenge in how to activate people to share ideas even more. Ideas cannot be forced but a way should be found to encourage people to post ideas even in the middle of their busy schedules and people should not think about whether the ideas are crazy or not because there is the point that after someone has shared a crazy idea, someone else reads it and develops it further- - - that is how the chain starts to progress.”<sup>12</sup>*

There are certain yearly objectives about how many ideas should be surfaced through the tool and one of the challenges concerning the system is that how employees could be activated and encouraged even more to share ideas. All ideas stay in the system for at least two months during which people can comment them. After being commented for at least two months, each product development idea is assessed by the product development group and according agreed regulations some ideas are transmitted forward if potential are seen in them. The system appears to be potentially a very effective tool for product development and idea generation once it is adopted by each member in the organization. Figure 1 presents the above described progress of idea processing for ideas surfacing in the new web-based system.

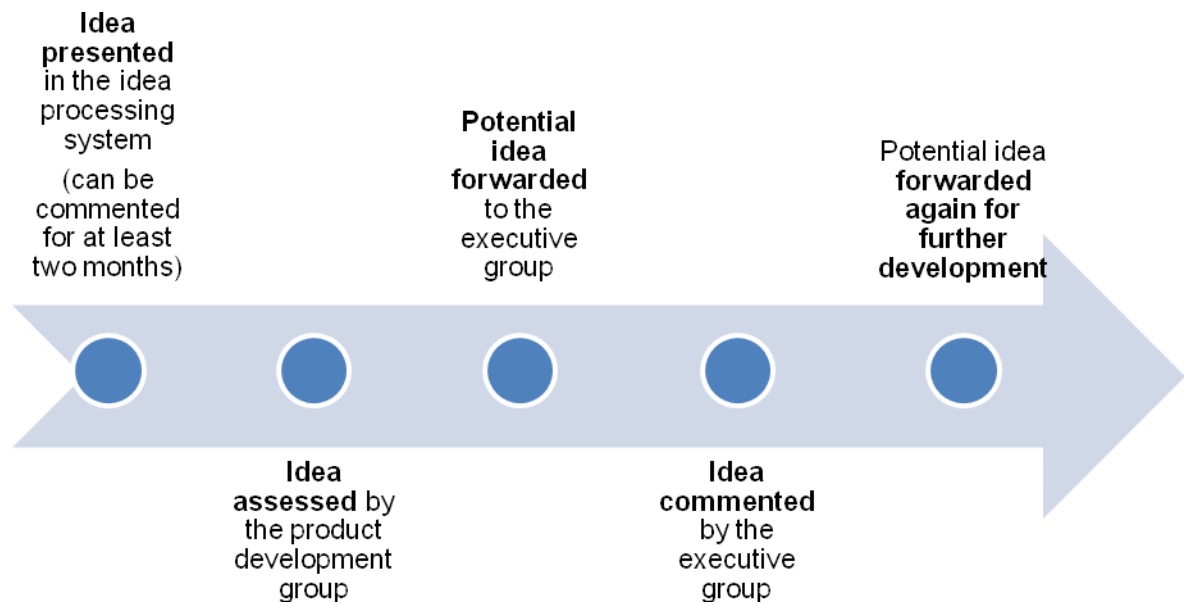


Figure 1. Progress of Idea Processing at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North

The new tool enabling an easy way for Metsähallitus employees to share ideas is, as stated, one of the most important tools of the product development group of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The idea processing system plays an important role especially in the beginning phases of a development project since it generates ideas. As stated, all product development ideas surfacing through the system are assessed. Perhaps employees could be motivated to share ideas with some sort of reward system so that they would be more eager to use the tool and emphasize new product ideas.

One form of product development has been and probably is the thorough going through of products of Villi Pohjola and the products of Eräsetti. It has been a little over two years since the two companies merged so taking the biggest possible advantage of the expertise of the two actors is a significant factor to be taken into consideration. However, this form of product development is not something that all interviewees would have mentioned. According to an interviewee, the products of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North are somewhat regionally different. Thus, making sure that the product wise benefits of the merging of the two companies are taken into account could play an important role in developing nationwide products.

Product development can also be done with cooperators. As Komppula and Boxberg (2005) and Kylänen (2005) have stated, tourism companies do not have to stand alone in providing versatile products and services to customers. By utilizing the expertise of one's own company and the expertise of the cooperators, more versatile products and services can be developed. Thus, Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North can do product development also with the cooperators; the cooperators provide new ideas or the representatives of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North can present requests to the cooperators and by collaborating, new products can be developed or existing products enhanced.

For idea generation, the company has sought support also from outside the organization. Someone may come in to activate the participants based on certain themes. This may be a very effective way to come up with ideas since the atmosphere is relaxed and innovative and different kinds of points of view can be utilized. Also, product development can be done based on the developers' own experiences; from time to time trips to different locations are organized. During these trips employees of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North can experience for instance different activities and thus ideas can be generated.

Taking signals from customers and using customer information in product development is highly valued at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The interviewees acknowledged that products are made for customers and thus customer needs, expectations and feedback have to be taken into consideration. The handling of customer information in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North is discussed more in depth in chapter 6.2.

According to Verhelä and Lackman (2003) comparing one's own company to another successful actor on the same field of business, could be a good way to find new ideas for business operations. To some extent this most probably is true but from the product development aspect it may be somewhat problematic. One of the interviewees acknowledged the issue with competitor

analyses; it may lead to copying competitors' ideas. According to Blue Ocean Strategy (2005), however, companies should aim at finding new and undiscovered market space whether it was within the existing markets or outside of them. When applied to product development, this could mean developing completely new products which, nevertheless, can be more challenging. Also Kylänen (2005) has emphasized the importance of developing new and even radical concepts; following the prevalent industrial trends and making small enhancements to existing products may not always be enough.

When viewing the product development processes and how systematic they are, it could be concluded that a lot of effort is put into the product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. Perhaps the established product development processes cannot be applied in every tourism company and companies should find their own ways to do product development in a way that still takes into consideration customers, the company's own ideology and capabilities, cooperators' expertise and the changes in the business and competitive environments. I could conclude by relying on the interviews conducted for this study that there are established product development processes at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and that especially the ideation phase is currently arranged quite effectively. Even though product development seems to be rather organized, there appears to be space for freedom and innovativeness also in the product development group. It is seen as a positive characteristic that the product development group consists of different kinds of people specialized in different operations and customer groups. The versatility of the group results in diverse ideas and points of view.

After the product development ideas are developed further by the product development group, the products should be tested. Testing is an effective and extremely important phase in product development projects since it may reveal some significant enhancements that perhaps should be made to the products. At Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North the testing is done before presenting the products to the sales personnel. When tested for instance by

a small group consisting of customers, some matters may surface that have not been noticed yet by the product development group.

*“- - - when testing is done for instance with a small group of customers, comments about what works, and what does not work, what was good, and what should perhaps be developed, may surface.” 14*

Based on the interviews I am not necessarily able to present the whole product development process of the company specifically, however, Figure 2 presents certain product development phases of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North.



Figure 2. Product Development Process of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North

## 6.2 Handling of Customer Information in Product Development

Previously I have described the methods of collecting customer information and product development of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. In this chapter, I will explain how the acquired customer information is handled or used in product development and present some challenges regarding the utilization of customer information.



As concluded by von Koskull (2009), acquiring customer information and then not using it in a beneficial way can be simply useless, not to mention expensive activity. Gathering and processing customer information, whether it was from or about the customer, always requires some resources but there is a general agreement that it is worth the trouble. As previously described, Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North applies different kinds of means to acquire information from and about their customers, feedback material and conversations with customers were emphasized in particular. However, it would be essential to get all actors in the organization to emphasize the meaning of customer information. As one of the interviewees stated, one of the challenges in documenting customer information is the technological systems where the information should be stored. Numerical or quantitative data is rather easy to draw from the systems but some difficulties may be faced when trying to retrieve more personal information on the customers. There is a possibility to write down information about the customers freely in an open text field but this information cannot be sorted or processed automatically by using the system. Going through this information customer by customer is quite a demanding work.

The role of information technology in sharing and managing customer knowledge has been highlighted a lot over the years. However, Hislop (2002) challenges this assumption that knowledge sharing and managing should rely as much on information technology as widely believed. Perhaps the trust and cooperation among employees ought to be emphasized more. Hislop (2002) also critiques the strict distinction made between tacit and explicit knowledge and the assumption that tacit knowledge is difficult to transfer through information technology and sharing explicit knowledge is rather easy. It is suggested that all knowledge has both tacit and explicit characteristics; if a document, including for instance customer information, is transferred through information technology only the explicit elements may be transferred, not the tacit ones. Thus, not all knowledge or information is shared. (See Hislop 2002, 165, 174.) At Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North this could mean that even if information on a customer is recorded in the system where it is accessible for everyone within the company, some elements of the information are still left out when someone else reads it.

As one of the interviewees concluded, it might be beneficial to write down tacit knowledge also. However, it is not necessarily possible to do so. Tacit knowledge is the kind of silent knowledge that exists in people's minds so defining it and writing it down might be a challenging task. Perhaps, some meaningful information is not always utilized to the highest possible extent since there are no agreed rules on how tacit knowledge ought to be managed. As mentioned before, the information written down in open text fields cannot be sorted or processed automatically in the current system of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. An interviewee pointed out that it might be an effective motivational factor for employees if they were sure that the customer information they write down in the system can later be easily utilized. The challenges regarding the system may inhibit the surfacing of for instance an important customer feedback which may again inhibit the use of a significant piece of customer information. In addition, it has been shown that effective knowledge sharing allows people to learn from others in an organization and thus enhance their own capabilities. The effective knowledge sharing should to some extent be enabled or facilitated by managers and they ought to also create systems through which individual knowledge could be turned into knowledge that the whole organization would be able to utilize. This again would result in an increase in organizational capabilities. (See Yang 2008, 352.)

The interviewees agreed on the fact that using customer information in product development is extremely important; products are made for customers, after all. Among others, tourism is an industry where product development is advised or even required to be continuous and here, knowledge and sharing the knowledge plays an important role (Jensen 2003, 12). Customer feedback, in its several forms, seems to be one of the most important channels of customer information at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and it appears that it is processed and examined to a great extent. In addition to the idea processing system applied at Metsähallitus and Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, going through customer feedback is another significant tool the product development group utilizes. However, it would not be effective or even reasonable if the product development group went

through this feedback one by one and then drew conclusions. The feedback material that requires action or that includes development proposals is viewed thoroughly and gone through by following certain steps: The leaders of different process teams go through the feedback concerning their operations according to a defined schedule and then forward the most relevant feedback to the product development group after which the group begins to process them further. It seems like the chain through which the information relevant to the product development group is forwarded is rather well-planned.

The product development group of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North consists of people specialized in different customer groups and people having expertise on different operations. As previously stated, a significant part of knowledge is stored in people's minds as tacit knowledge. However, Madhavan and Grover (1998) suggest that when developing new products, the new products are, in fact, embodied knowledge. In development projects the knowledge embedded in the group members' minds can be utilized through interaction. When a new product is developed, it could be said that new knowledge has been created when the group has worked together for a common goal; the knowledge possessed by the group as a whole has been turned into a new product. (Madhavan-Grover 1998, 2.) Thus, having an assigned product development team is effective since it enables the combination of individuals' knowledge and may also create new knowledge.

An interesting, and most probably proactive, type of product development is the one done together with the customer. In occasions where representatives of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and existing and potential customers are present, productive conversations can be had. During these occasions it is discussed which products or services the customers are using, what they would like to have more and what they expect. This is an effective way to receive development ideas straight from customers and thus product development could be said to be done somewhat together with customers. The program of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North "Be a Finn for a Day" is an example of a product that was developed based on a customer event.

Another form of using customer information or knowledge at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North is following what sells and what does not sell. Monitoring which products are appealing to customers; what they buy can be an effective way to detect development needs or simply find out which products are not to be retained in the company's product range. However, as Komppula and Boxberg (2005) have stated, it would be beneficial for the company to find out why a particular product did not succeed so that they could learn from it for the future. For acquiring information on why a product did not succeed, new customer information ought to be gathered.

Customer information is highly valued at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North and using it in product development was considered important by every interviewee. Nevertheless, there was some division in the perceptions about to what extent the customer information is actually used in the development projects. It could be concluded that customer information plays a particularly important role in the development, enhancing and altering the already existing products.

*"- - - I see it more in the development of the existing products- - -. -  
- -. By using customer feedback we are good at developing the  
existing products, we do well in that and there are no big... We  
receive customer feedback quite a lot and when we are active we  
definitely get enough but coming up with new product ideas, that is  
the challenging part." I2*

It is easier for customers to share their perceptions and possible proposals for a product or service they have experienced, whereas it is difficult or perhaps even impossible for them to come up with new product ideas without any experience or knowledge. Customers do not necessarily know what can be done and offered by the company.

*"Customers rarely give completely new product ideas at least it  
has not occurred to me that a customer would have brought  
something totally new- - - in my opinion, when there has been a lot  
of talk about being very customer oriented and waiting for the  
customer to share ideas, customers cannot, it is difficult for the  
customers to come up with something new. Or at least I have not  
experienced it to work like that." I1*

Based on for instance customer feedback it is easier for Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North to develop the existing products to meet the demand even better. Using customer information in product development may be a motivational factor for the customers as well; when a customer gives feedback or presents a proposal and later notes that it has been taken into consideration at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North, it may have positive effects. In new product and service development, the knowledge the product development group possesses and the tools they apply may play an important role. As stated before, when the group interacts, new knowledge may be created and a new product may be the evidence of that. Figure 3 presents the presumably most important aspects of customer information use in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North.

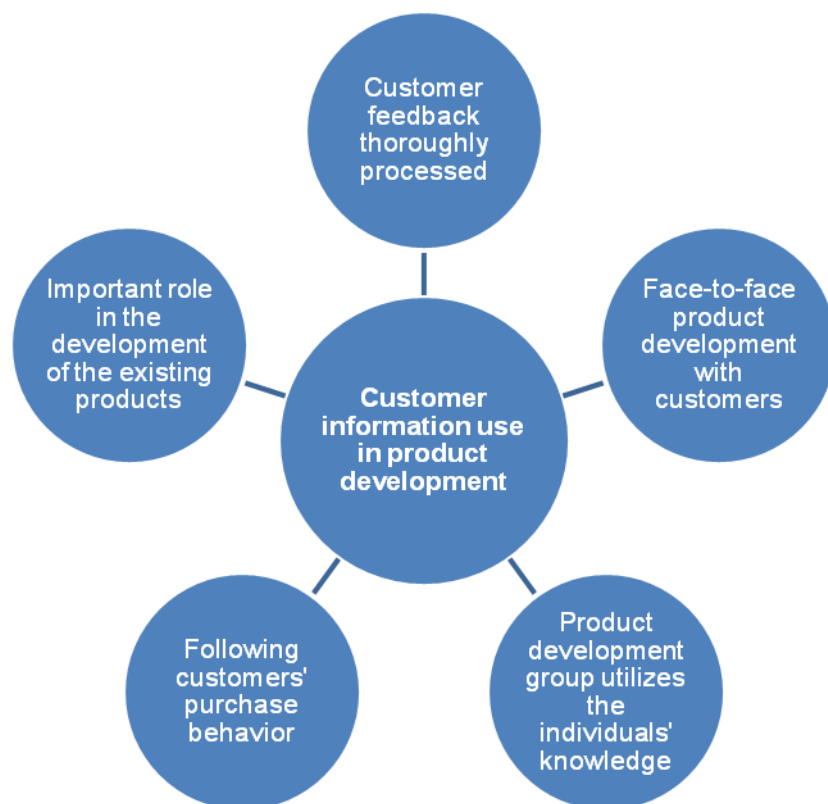


Figure 3. Customer Information Use in Product Development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North

To conclude, the customer information utilized in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North can be from the customer or about the customer and product development may be conducted even together with customers. The information from the customers is seen in the form of for instance feedback whereas information, or knowledge, about the customers can already exist within the company. It is the knowledge employees possess about the customers as a result of experience. These different types of information and knowledge can be used in different ways in product development. The information received from the customer plays a particularly important role in the development of the existing products whereas the information or knowledge about the customers can be used in developing also new products and services. (See e.g. von Koskull 2009, 86-87.)

### **6.3 Discussion and Recommendations**

By conducting this case study research, I aimed at gaining an understanding about the studied areas relating to one company, Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. Considering the goals I had regarding this thesis project I believe the methods applied were suitable. By conducting thematic interviews with four employees of the company, I was able to explore matters concerning customer information collection, meeting customer segment and product development of the company. Even though the different themes were in a way studied separately, they all contributed to a wider understanding. I believe it was important for me as a researcher, first to explore the collection of customer information and product development processes of the company and then go deeper into the customer information use in product development.

By studying the meeting customer segment, I was able to acquire valuable information about meeting customers' characteristics, which I believe will be beneficial for me in the future. I hope that by documenting the information about meeting customers shared by four different members of the organization this thesis contributes to the meeting product development or perhaps helps the company form a more comprehensive view on the particular customer segment. I hoped to be able to document some tacit

information about the meeting customers of the company. However, as stated, documenting and handling tacit knowledge can be very difficult or demanding so probably a lot of the information I gathered about meeting customers is already known within the company. Still I hope that by combining four perceptions about the customer segment, this thesis provides a beneficial tool for the company.

Based on four thematic interviews, I believe I was able to form a comprehensive view on the studied subjects. However, increasing the number of interviews would have perhaps resulted in more diverse analyses. It would have been interesting to interview for instance some members of the frontline personnel of the company, since they most probably possess a great amount of customer information, and knowledge concerning different operations of the organization.

Since I studied the previously described fields only by focusing on one particular company, the analysis can be generalized only to a limited extent and the research provides very case-specific analyses. The different fields were studied rather profoundly so the analyses can probably be considered reliable in the case of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The analyses and conclusions were written based on this specific case and the empirical data gathered. (See Kylänen 2010.) Probably the studied operations work differently in different organizations and even the characteristics of meeting customers may differ according to the type of meeting service or product provider. However, some of the studied subjects such as the use of customer information in product development can be emphasized probably in any tourism company. Some of the aspects in the description of what makes a good meeting may be perhaps utilized elsewhere as well.

My thesis provides only limited conclusions and there is definitely room for further research regarding the studied subjects at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. If the company hopes to develop a certain product family targeted to business customers, these customers of the company ought to be interviewed. Thus, the information would come straight from the customers and interviewing might be an effective way to acquire information on what

kinds of needs and expectations the customers have regarding a specific type of product. Also, examining the product development projects of the company by, for instance, being present in the meetings of the product development group could be an interesting subject to study. By following the product development work in practice, a research might be able to give more development ideas for the product development itself. Thus it could be easier to really find out what works well and what perhaps should be enhanced, what comes to product development.

As Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North has recently applied the idea processing system commonly used at Metsähallitus, it could be interesting and beneficial for the company to examine how well the new system has been adopted, for instance after a couple of years of use. Thus, it could be studied how well the system contributes to product development and how eagerly members of the company have been sharing ideas through the system and if they are not, it should be searched how they could be activated more to do so.

By conducting the research I learned a lot. I was able to familiarize myself with all the stages a research as this requires; from gathering the theoretical background and planning and conducting the research in practice, to the analyses. Perhaps the most challenging parts of my thesis process were to find all significant theory to the background and analyzing the interview material and finding the most valuable and significant points from the empirical data.



## 7 CONCLUSION

Three main areas of study in my thesis were the meeting customer segment, the collection of customer information, and the use of customer information in product development at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. The basis for focusing on the meeting customer segment of the company was the goal to provide a tool that could perhaps be used in development of products targeted to meeting and business customers. I hope that by gathering together four perceptions of the meeting customers' characteristics and important aspects in meetings, this thesis presents a comprehensive view on this particular customer segment. Relying on the research conducted, the most important factors contributing to a successful meeting of the customers of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North seem to be that everything that has been promised is delivered in the correct way, the private meeting environment close to nature is ensured, the atmosphere is made innovative and relaxed and possible programs and additional services are realized as agreed.

The basis for examining the collection and use of customer information and knowledge in product development was the general assumption that using this information in development projects is important. I studied both the means of gathering customer information and the ways of handling and using it in product development. It can be said on the basis of my study that customer information and utilizing it in product development is considered significant at Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North. For instance, customer feedback is both actively sought and received from different kinds of customers. However, a way to make customers give feedback independently even more should be established and in the future social media will perhaps play an important role in this. Feedback and other kind of customer information can be received through different channels, two of the most important ones being personal conversations with customers and the feedback received through different channels. When it comes to customers, concepts knowledge and information perhaps ought to be associated to them somewhat separately. A company like Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North probably goes through a lot of everyday business operations by utilizing the

tacit knowledge existing in the employees' minds and this individual knowledge, also about customers, may be utilized in the product development group's meetings.

Customer feedback and development proposals reach the product development group of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North through a certain chain, which probably contributes to the effectiveness of the group's work. Following customer feedback and purchase behavior and then utilizing this information in product development is emphasized at the company. Sometimes, product development is even done somewhat together with customers and when external factors such as the economic situation affect for instance business customers' purchase ability, the company has to adapt to the changed circumstances. While the company's own capabilities are utilized in new product and service development, customer feedback plays a particularly important role in the development of the existing products.

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**APPENDICES**

Frame for Thematic Interviews (in English) Appendix 1.

Frame for Thematic Interviews (in Finnish) Appendix 2.

## Frame for Thematic Interviews (in English) Appendix 1.

### **Frame for the Thematic Interviews:**

#### **1. The Customer of the Company**

- Who are the customers of the company? Different customer groups?
- The separation of customers?
- The most important customers of the company

#### **2. Common Characteristics of the Customers**

- Are there common characteristics in different customer types?
- Differences between customer groups

#### **3. Collection of Customer Information**

- From where has the previously discussed customer information accumulated?
- How or from where is customer information collected in general (as a company)?
- In which form is the information?
- Development proposals for the collection of customer information?

#### **4. Product Development**

- How organized is product development at the company?
- Is customer information used in product development? How?
- Do customers provide a lot of new product ideas?
- Should customer information be used in product development? Is using customer information significant?
- Who is responsible for bringing the customer information into product development?
- Development proposals for product development?

#### **5. Meeting Customers**

- What is a meeting customer like?
- How much purely meeting customers?
- Is there any international meeting customers?
- Same products to both international and domestic meeting customers?
- What makes a good meeting? The most important matters in a successful meeting?
- The role of Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild North in the succeeding of the meeting?
- Development proposals for meeting products or services?

## Frame for Thematic Interviews (in Finnish) Appendix 2.

### **Teemahaastattelurunko:**

#### **1. Yrityksen asiakas**

- Keitä ovat yrityksen asiakkaat? Eri asiakasryhmät?
- Asiakkaiden erottelu?
- Yrityksen tärkeimmät asiakkaat

#### **2. Asiakkaiden yhteiset piirteet**

- Onko eri asiakastyypeillä yhteisiä piirteitä?
- Erot asiakasryhmien välillä

#### **3. Asiakastiedon hankinta**

- Mistä tämä (aiemmin kerrottu) asiakastieto on kertynyt?
- Miten tai mistä asiakastietoa yleensä hankitaan?
- Millaisessa muodossa tieto on?
- Kehitysehdotuksia asiakastiedon hankintaan?

#### **4. Tuotekehitys**

- Kuinka järjestelmällistä yrityksen tuotekehitys on?
- Käytetäänkö asiakastietoa tuotekehityksessä? Miten?
- Tuleeko asiakkailta paljon uusia tuoteideoita?
- Pitäisikö asiakastietoa käyttää tuotekehityksessä? Onko sen käyttäminen tärkeää?
- Kenen vastuulla asiakastiedon tuominen tuotekehitykseen on?
- Kehitysehdotuksia tuotekehitykseen?

#### **5. Kokousasiakkaat**

- Millainen on kokousasiakas?
- Kuinka paljon puhtaasti kokousasiakkaita?
- Onko kansainvälisiä kokousasiakkaita?
- Samat tuotteet sekä kansainvälisille että kotimaisille kokousasiakkaille?
- Miten syntyy hyvä kokous? Tärkeimmät asiat kokouksen onnistumisessa?
- Villi Pohjola – Eräsetti Wild Northin rooli kokouksen onnistumisessa?
- Kehitysehdotuksia kokoustuotteisiin/-palveluihin?